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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ORIGIN OF RELIGION.

I. THE ORIGIN OF THE IDEAS OF GHOSTS, NATURE-BEINGS AND CREATORS

IT has been the habit of most students of the origin of religion to concern themselves exclusively with the origin of the god-idea, as if belief in the existence of gods was identical with religion. They have ignored its other essential components, the motives and the feelings. But the limitation of the problem of origin to that of the god-idea is not entirely amiss. For there are neither specifically religious motives, nor specifically religious feelings. Any and every human need and longing may, at some stage or other, become a spring of religion, and conversely the feelings and emotions met with in any form of religion appear also in non-religious experience. As to the practical means of securing the favor of the gods, it is agreed that they were at the beginning essentially the same as those men were already in the habit of using in their relations with their fellow-men. It is the power with which man thinks himself in relation, and through whom he endeavors to secure the gratification of his desires, which alone is distinctive of religious life. And so the origin of the idea of gods, though not identical with the origin of religion, is at any rate its central problem.

All living savages known to us believe in ghosts, in spirits, and, perhaps, also in particular beings risen to the

dignity of gods. Whence these ideas of unseen personal beings? They may be traced to four independent sources.

(1) *States of temporary loss of consciousness—trances, swoons, sleep*, — seem in themselves sufficient to suggest to ignorant observers the existence of “doubles,” i. e., of beings dwelling within the body, animating it, and able to absent themselves from it for a time or permanently. These alleged beings have been called “ghosts” or “souls.”

(2) *Apparitions in sleep, in the hallucinations of fever, of insanity, or otherwise*, of persons still living or dead, seem also sufficient to lead to a belief in ghosts and in survival after death.

These two distinct classes of facts have no doubt cooperated in the production of the belief in ghosts, so that I shall refer to them in the sequel as the double origin of the ghost-belief.

Echoes and reflections in water and polished surfaces may have played a subsidiary rôle in the establishment or confirmation of the belief in ghosts and in spirits.

(3) *The personification of striking natural phenomena, tornadoes, thunder, sudden spring-vegetation*. The report of Tanner that one night Picheto (a North American chief), becoming much alarmed at the violence of a storm, got up, offered some tobacco to the thunder and entreated it to stop, should not excite surprise even though it should refer to the lowest savage. There is, of course, a long way between the sudden, temporary, and isolated personification of a natural phenomenon and the stable and generalized belief in the existence of personal agents behind visible nature. What we mean to assert here is merely that the systematized belief can have arisen out of the impulsive and occasional personification of awe-striking and frightening spectacles.

(4) Many persons have observed with surprise the apparition in young children of the problem of creation.

A child notices a curiously shaped stone and asks who made it. He is told that it was formed in the stream by the water. Then, suddenly, he throws out in quick succession, questions that are as much exclamations of astonishment as queries, "Who made the stream, who the mountain, who the earth?" *The necessity of a Maker is no doubt borne in upon the savage at a very early time, not upon every member of a tribe, but upon some peculiarly gifted individual who imparts to his fellows the awe-striking idea of a mysterious, all-powerful, Creator. The form under which the Creator is imagined is, of course, derived from the beings with which his senses have made the savage familiar.*

In what chronological order did the three kinds of unseen beings appear? Which came first, ghosts, nature-beings or creators? Our present knowledge does not provide an answer to this query. But this one may venture to affirm, they need not have appeared in the same order everywhere. It is conceivable that among certain groups of men the idea of a creator first attained clearness and influence, while elsewhere the idea of ghosts implanted itself before the others.

A question of greater importance to the student of the origin of religion is that of the lineage of the first god or gods, i. e., of the first unseen, personal, agents with whom men entered into relations definite and influential enough to deserve the name religion. Are they descended from ghosts, or are they nature-beings, or creators? I say "descended" from ghosts, for ghosts have not originally, all the qualities required of a divinity. They are at first hardly greater than men, though somewhat different. They must be magnified and differentiated from human beings if they are to generate the religious attitude. A comparison of the double-source of the ghost-belief with the source of the belief in nature-beings suggests the following re-

marks. Phenomena belonging to classes one and two necessarily lead to a belief in unseen *manlike* beings. The familiar relation of ghosts with the tribe, and also the great number of them, offer a definite resistance to the process of deification. It is otherwise with the personified nature-powers, for they are not necessarily, like ghosts, mere dead men in another life. In conceiving of an agent animating nature, the imagination is not limited to the thought of a particular human being, not even of a human being at all. The thunder might be the voice of some monstrous animal. The surpassing variety, the magnitude and magnificence of nature, stimulate the imagination into more original activity than the apparitions of men and women in dreams or in trances. For these reasons, if the choice was between ghosts and nature-beings, it would be advisable to favor the hypothesis that the first gods were derived from the spontaneous personification of striking natural events. But the idea of a creator probably takes precedence from ghosts and nature-beings in the making of religion, for a World-Creator possesses from the first the greatness necessary to the object of a cult, and the creature who recognizes a creator can hardly fail to feel his relationship to him. A Maker cannot, moreover, be an enemy to those who issue from him, but must, it seems, appear as the Great Ancestor, benevolently inclined towards his offspring. Incomparable greatness, creative power, benevolence, are as many attributes favorable to the appearance of a religion in the high sense which, as we shall see, W. Robertson Smith gives to the word.

The order in which appeared the three kinds of unseen agents is of considerable importance, for if, for instance, the ghost-belief was first, it seems unavoidable that ghosts should have been projected into natural objects and used to explain natural phenomena. It is a task for the historian of religion to trace the rise of the idea of God in its several

possible sources and to indicate in each particular case the contribution of each source to the making of the earliest gods.

II. THE ORIGINAL EMOTION OF PRIMITIVE RELIGIOUS LIFE.

The failure to recognize in religion three functionally related constituents—conation, feeling, and thought—is responsible for a confusing use of the term “origin.” Some have said that religion began with the belief in super-human, mysterious beings; others that it had its origin in the emotional life, and these usually specify fear; while a third group have declared that its genesis is to be found in the will-to-live. At this stage of our inquiry the reader realizes no doubt that these three utterances are incomplete, inasmuch as each one of them expresses either the origin, or the original form, of only one of the constituents of religion.

I have in the preceding section dealt with the origin of the god-idea. The space at my disposal does not allow me to say anything regarding the rise of the methods by which man entered in relation with the divine beings in whom he believes. For the same reason, I shall have to be very brief in dealing with the original emotional form of religion.

Two opposed opinions divide the field. The more widely held is that fear is the beginning of religion; the other, accepted by a small but weighty minority, finds its starting point in a “loving reverence for known gods.” We shall have little difficulty in arriving at an understanding of the matter in which these two views, instead of opposing, supplement each other. The origin of the two emotions mentioned, fear and love, fall, of course, outside the limits of this essay, since they both existed before religion.

Hume’s conclusion, that “the first ideas of religion arose . . . from a concern with regard to the events of life and fears which actuate the human mind,” is maintained

by most of our contemporaries. Among psychologists, Ribot, for instance, affirms that "the religious sentiment is composed first of all of the emotion of fear in its different degrees, from profound terror to vague uneasiness, due to faith in an unknown, mysterious, impalpable Power."² The fear-theory is well supported by two classes of interdependent facts observed, we are told, in every uncivilized people: (1) Evil spirits are the first to attain a certain degree of definiteness; (2) man enters into definite relations first with these evil spirits. If the reader will refer to *The Origin of Civilisation* by Lord Avebury (Sir John Lubbock), 3d ed., pp. 212-215, he will see there how widely true is the opinion expressed by Schweinfurth, "Among the Bongos of Central Africa good spirits are quite unrecognized, and, according to the general negro idea, no benefit can ever come from a spirit." In many other tribes good spirits are known, but the savage always "pays more attention to deprecating the wrath of the evil than securing the favor of the good beings." The tendency is to let the good spirits alone, because, being good, they will do us good of themselves, just as evil spirits do us harm unsolicited.

Shall we, then, admit the fear-origin of religion? Yes, provided it be understood (1) that fear represents only one of the three constituents of religion, (2) that it is not in virtue of a particular quality or property that fear is the primitive emotional form of religion, and (3) that this admission is not intended to imply the impossibility of religion having ever anywhere begun with aggressive or tender emotions. Regarding the second reservation, it should be understood that the making of religion requires nothing found in fear that is not also present in other emotions. If tender emotions are not conspicuous at the dawn of religion, it is only because it so happens that the circumstances in which

² *The Psychology of the Emotions*, p. 309.

the least cultured peoples known to us live, are such as to keep fear in the foreground of consciousness. Fear was the first of the well-organized emotional reactions. It antedates the human species, and appears to this day first in the young animal, as well as in the infant. No doubt, before the protective fear-reaction could have been established, the lust of life had worked itself out into aggressive habits, those for the securing of food, for instance. But these desires did not, as early as in the case of fear, give rise to any emotional reaction possessing the constancy, definiteness, and poignancy of fear. The place of fear in primitive religion is, then, due not to its intrinsic qualities, but simply to circumstances which made it appear first as a well-organized instinct-emotion vitally connected with the maintainance of life. It is for exactly the same reason that the dominant emotion in the relations of uncivilized men with each other and, still more evidently so, of wild animals with each other, is usually that of fear.

When I say that fear need not have been the original religious emotion, I have in mind the possibility of groups of primitive men having lived in circumstances so favorable to peace and safety that fear was not very often present with them. This is not a preposterous supposition. Wild men need not, any more than wild animals, have found themselves so situated as to be kept in a constant state of fright. If the African antelope runs for its life on an average twice a day, as Sir Galton supposes, the wild horse on the South American plains, before the hunter appeared on his pastures, ran chiefly for his pleasure. Travelers have borne testimony to the absence of fear in birds inhabiting certain regions. But, it may be asked, would religion have come into existence under these peaceful circumstances? A life of relative ease, comfort, and security is not precisely conducive to the establishment of practical relations with gods. Why should happy and self-

sufficient men look to unseen, mysterious beings for an assistance not really required? Under these circumstances the unmixed type of fear-religion would never have come into existence. Religion would have appeared relatively late and, from the first, in a nobler form. In such peoples a feeling of dependence upon benevolent gods, regarded probably as creators and all-fathers, eliciting admiration rather than fear or selfish desire, would have characterized its beginnings. This possibility should not be rejected *a priori*.

The other theory is well represented by W. Robertson Smith. He denies that the attempt to appease evil beings is the foundation of religion. I quote: "From the earliest times religion, as distinct from magic and sorcery, addresses itself to kindred and friendly beings, who may indeed be angry with their people for a time, but are always placable except to the enemies of their worshipers or to renegade members of the community. It is not with a vague fear of unknown powers, but with a loving reverence for known gods who are knit to their worshipers by strong bonds of kinship, that religion, in the only sense of the word, begins."³

One may agree with Robertson Smith without denying that practices intended to protect oneself against evil spirits preceded the establishment of affectionate relations with benevolent powers. As a matter of fact, our author admits this fully. What he denies is that the attempt to propitiate, in dread, evil spirits, is religion. It cannot be doubted that the inner experience as well as the outer attitude and behavior of a person are substantially different when he seeks to conciliate a radically evil being than when he communes with a fundamentally benevolent one. Yet in both cases an anthropopathic relation with a personal being is established. In this respect, both stand opposed to magical behavior. This common element is so funda-

³ *The Religion of the Semites*, p. 55.

mental that it seems to us advisable to make the name religion include both types of relation. And since they differ, nevertheless, in important respects, the phrases "negative religion" may be used to designate man's dealings with radically bad spirits, and "positive religion" his relations with fundamentally benevolent ones.

Positive religion is at first not at all free from fear. The benevolent gods are prompt to wrath, and cruelly avenge their broken laws. The more striking development of religious life is the gradual substitution of love for fear in worship. This is one more reason for not completely dissociating the propitiation of evil spirits from the worship of kindly gods.

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